

TROPICAL "TRIFLE" OF MANGO AND ALMONDS

Ante de Mango y Alemendras

I LOVE THIS LIQUEUR-LACED sponge cake and pureed fruit or custard for its delicious texture and long history in Mexican cooking. My earliest Mexican cookbooks, from the 1830s, have recipes for it. When working on a benefit seventeenth-century-style dinner for Chicago's Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum, I found a recipe almost identical to this one in the pages of culinary writings left by Sor Juana Inéz de la Cruz, a nun who was also Mexico's greatest poet and mystic of that period.

Unlike most trifles, this version utilizes fruit rather than cream, making it lighter, fresher and more satisfying after a spicy meal. I am indebted to Mexican cooking teacher and author María Dolores Torres Yzábal who showed me how vital a dessert *ante* can be.

SERVES 8 TO 10

FOR THE CAKE

*¾ cup cake flour (measured by
scooping and leveling)*

1 teaspoon baking powder

6 large eggs, room temperature

½ cup plus 2 tablespoons sugar

1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

FOR THE FRUIT

4 large (2¼ pounds total) mangoes

*⅓ to ⅔ cup sugar, plus a little more
if needed*

2 tablespoons fresh lime juice

*½ teaspoon pure almond extract,
optional*

FOR THE SYRUP AND FINISHING THE DISH

⅓ cup sugar

*About ⅓ cup dry sherry or orange
liqueur*

½ cup lightly toasted sliced almonds

*About 1 cup Sweetened Whipped
Cream (page 406), for serving*

1. *The cake.* Turn on the oven to 350 degrees. Grease and flour a 17 x 11-inch jelly-roll pan. Lightly grease the pan, then line with parchment paper; grease and flour the paper. Sift together the flour and baking powder. Separate the eggs: In the large bowl of an electric mixer, place the 6 yolks; in another bowl, place 4 of the whites (refrigerate or freeze the remaining 2 whites for another preparation.) To the yolks, add ½ cup of the sugar, the vanilla and 3 tablespoons hot water, then beat at medium-high speed for 5 full minutes, until light in color and texture. Using a whisk or rubber spatula, gently fold in the flour mixture in 2 additions. If you have only one bowl, scrape the mixture into a large bowl, wash the mixer bowl and beaters or whisk attachment and transfer the whites to the mixer bowl.

Immediately beat the whites at medium speed until they hold soft peaks. Add 1 *tablespoon* of the remaining sugar; beat for 1 minute, then add the remaining *tablespoon* of sugar and beat for a minute or so longer, until the whites hold nearly firm (but not stiff) shiny peaks. Fold into the batter in three additions.

Gently spread the batter in an even layer onto the prepared pan. Bake until nicely browned and springy to the touch, about 15 minutes. Cool 10 minutes on a cooling rack, then turn out onto the rack and carefully peel off the paper. Cool completely.

2. *The fruit.* With a knife, peel the mangoes, then cut the flesh from the pit. Chop it into 1-inch pieces, scoop into a bowl and mash with a fork (there should be 2 generous cups). Add $\frac{1}{3}$ *cup* of the sugar, mix well and let stand about 30 minutes to draw some of the juice from the fruit. Strain the mixture and put the liquid into a medium saucepan. Simmer over medium heat until reduced to $\frac{1}{2}$ *cup*, then stir in the mango and simmer gently 5 minutes longer, stirring often. Remove from the heat and stir in lime juice, almond extract (if you are using it), and enough of the remaining $\frac{1}{3}$ *cup* of the sugar to sweeten the fruit nicely.

3. *The syrup.* In a small saucepan combine $\frac{2}{3}$ *cup* water and the $\frac{1}{3}$ *cup* sugar. Bring to a boil, stirring to dissolve the sugar. Cool slightly, then stir in the sherry or liqueur.

4. *Assembling the ante.* Cut the cake into two 8-inch circles (you can freeze the cake scraps to use later in making a half recipe or 3 or 4 individual *cajeta* puddings (page 399). Place one circle on a shallow serving dish 10 or 12 inches in diameter. Brush thoroughly with the syrup. Spread on *half* of the fruit mixture, then top with the other cake circle. Brush with remaining syrup and spread on the remaining fruit mixture. Smooth the top and refrigerate for several hours for the texture to become more compact and homogeneous. Sprinkle the top with toasted almonds and cut into wedges. For a dressier presentation, pipe lightly sweetened whipped cream around the edge of the dish.

ADVANCE PREPARATION—This is one dessert that actually gets better with age; make it a day ahead if possible, or up to 3 or 4 days. Store it well-covered in the refrigerator.

SHORTCUTS—About 30 (14 ounces) sponge cake-type ladyfingers can replace the cake.

VARIATIONS AND IMPROVISATIONS—This recipe welcomes a variety of interpretations. Regional Mexican liqueurs (from Toluca, Veracruz, Yucatan and Oaxaca) lend a wonderful flavor of place. And tropical fruits like guanabana, chirimoya and mamey are typical and delicious (none will need the sugaring and boiling in step 2; simply sweeten the coarse puree and continue). Ripe papaya and peaches can be used, but they will need the same treatment as the mango. You may stir cream into the fruit or substitute pastry cream for the puree, with or without pieces of fruit. The almonds easily can be omitted.